

FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: February 12, 2015

Agenda Item: Choteau Mountain Ranch Conservation Easement

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 min

Background

The Choteau Mountain Ranch is approximately 10,540 acres comprised of 5,060 acres of contiguous deeded land with the remainder being Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and federal BLM leases. The property sits between the Blackleaf and Ear Mountain wildlife management areas along the Rocky Mountain Front and includes 1.5 miles of the Teton River on the south and borders the BLM Blindhorse ONA on the west. The property has been on the market for five years. A local buyer is pursuing purchase of the property and returning it to a working livestock operation and is in seeking a conservation easement with FWP to assist in this endeavor. The potential buyer and his family have a long history in the area and feel strongly about wildlife conservation and preserving the land under the terms of a FWP conservation easement.

The area supports numerous game and nongame species, including an elk calving area and important summer and winter range for elk and mule deer. The riparian corridor provides year-round habitat for white-tailed deer and moose. Antelope are frequently seen on the property. Grizzly and black bears inhabit the property as well as mountain lion. Upland game birds include sharp-tailed grouse, gray partridge and forest grouse.

Acquisition of a conservation easement of this property would protect 5,060 acres of native lands, provide for and improve functioning wildlife habitat, and would prevent fragmentation from subdivision in an area where that has been occurring. Access to public land would be secured and expanded under the terms of a conservation easement in an area where access is very limited.

Public Involvement Process & Results

FWP has not sought any public comment at this time. Upon endorsement from the Commission, FWP would conduct appropriate analysis, public review processes and negotiations.

Alternatives and Analysis

The conservation easement alternative allows the ranch to remain in private ownership while conserving its productivity, ecological and recreational values. The property is located in an area ripe for subdivision. If FWP took no action, the land would likely be sold to a recreational buyer or a developer. Opportunities to return the property to a working cattle ranch, conserve and enhance wildlife habitat, and increase public access would be lost.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

Because of the importance of conserving this land, including the high resource values and public recreational opportunities, FWP recommends that the Commission endorse this proposal so FWP may proceed to further develop this opportunity.

Proposed Motion

I move the Fish & Wildlife Commission endorse this conservation easement project, allowing FWP to initiate negotiations and to conduct analysis and associated public review.